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Reading Edward Thomas in the Anthropocene

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Reading Edward Thomas in the Anthropocene

As has been widely remarked, the Anthropocene has done strange things to our sense of time. The coincidence of deep time past and potentially catastrophic futures in the present-day consumption of fossil fuels has led to what Timothy Clark has called a derangement of scale. This article proposes that the work of Edward Thomas offers a mode of reading and thinking across multiple scales suitable to the disjunctive time of the Anthropocene. Concentrating on Thomas' decentered perspectives, his interleaving of sound and syntax, and innovation of a form of fractal poetics, I argue that his ecological sensibility anticipates both the radical interconnectedness of Timothy Morton's "ecological thought," and what Barbara Adam calls "time ecology": a sense of landscapes constituted by other times. Reading Edward Thomas involves a poetics of time ecology — decentred and open, present to the enduring past and the already-occurring future — appropriate to the temporal distortions of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Edward Thomas; Anthropocene; Timothy Morton; ecological thought; time ecology; fractals

On 10th May 2013, climate scientists at the Manua Loa Observatory in Hawaii announced that atmospheric CO₂ levels had reached the largely symbolic but unprecedented milestone of 400 ppm (parts per million) (ESRI, 2013). The last time CO₂ concentration had been so high was between 3 and 5 million years ago; not even a ripple of hesitation registered in the rate of global carbon emissions, however, and humankind has continued to plough on towards Pliocene-era CO₂ concentrations. As has been widely remarked, humanity has attained the kind of influence on planetary ecosystems previously associated with geological processes (Chakrabarty, 2009; Ellsworth and Kruse, 2013). As we become acquainted with our new geological agency and face the predicted, catastrophic consequences of pumping such quantities of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, we would do well to also contemplate the ground beneath our feet, which bears the marks of our much longer-held status as *geomorphic* agents. Humans have moved the earth to suit their needs since Paleolithic times. For

much of that time, however, this geomorphic agency was negligible: the main drivers of desedimentation were the same natural processes which, over the preceding half-billion years, had lowered continental surfaces by a few tens of meters per million years. Significant leaps in anthropogeomorphic activity in the Iron Age and since the Industrial Revolution have gradually tipped the balance: according to Bruce Wilkinson, current construction and agricultural practices are sufficient to lower surfaces by a few hundred meters per million years (Wilkinson, 2005, 161). Roger Hooke paints an even more striking picture: humans have moved enough earth in the past 5000 year period to build a 4000 meter high mountain range, 40 km wide and 100 km long; at current rates of activity, this hypothetical mountain range could be doubled in length by the turn of the century (Hooke, 2000, 845).

This coincidence of the geologic and the human is doing strange things to our sense of time. We displace vast quantities of earth to excavate and consume fuels formed over the course of unimaginably deep time to meet the needs of the present, all the while haunted by the spectre of those whose future lives will be profoundly affected by our actions; actions which are themselves thoroughly decentred, achieving their effects in unpredictable, often delayed, and widely, if unevenly distributed ways. Such are the impossible temporalities of the Anthropocene, in which the relationship between action and consequence are subject to what Timothy Clark has called a derangement of scale: whereby we cannot identify our culpability in terms of climate change in any given action (boiling a kettle; taking a transatlantic flight), ‘but only in the contingency of how many other such phenomena there are, have been and will be, at even vast distances of time and space’ (Clark, 2012, 150). Such radical disorientations are not just an intriguing sideshow; it is in these weird, disjunctive temporalities that our actions take place and in which their consequences are exponentially extended across time and space. But what might a poetics of this involuted, strange sense of time look like?

I want to suggest that the poetry of Edward Thomas—a poet well-versed in paying attention to the ground beneath him, for whom ‘the prettiest things on

ground are the paths’ (Thomas, 2008, 34)—presents us with a mode of reading and thinking across multiple scales which can help us to comprehend the disjunctive time of the Anthropocene. My method follows Clark’s assertion that ‘creatively deranging the text through embedding it in multiple and even contradictory frames’ (Clark, 2012, 163) allows readers to engage constructively with what he calls the *scale effects* of anthropogenic climate change: the difficulty of imagining the possible outcomes of any action (on whatever material scale) in relation to present, past, and future environments (Clark, 2010, 136; 2012, 150). My supposition is that Thomas’ particularly acute sense of environmental history invites a decentred reading of this sort, and in turn permits a reading experience closer to the peculiar torsions of time and scale in the Anthropocene.

One of Thomas’ most incisive readers, Edna Longley, has argued that his particular ecological sensibility situates him in the common imaginations of both the Edwardian period and the early twenty-first century (Longley, 1996, 108). It is certainly true that the uneasy, elegiac spirit of Thomas’ work has inspired much of what in the UK has been called the ‘new nature writing’. His insistence on the value of moving out from human society into the natural world has found modern equivalents in recent work by Roger Deakin, Kathleen Jamie, Esther Woolfson, and Tim Dee. Robert Macfarlane, whose *The Old Ways* is a signature instance of this kind of writing — a deeply literate hybrid of quest and meditation, as well as a hymn to the release which Thomas found in nature — puts it concisely when he holds up the latter’s attraction to “landscape’s instabilities” as key to his contemporary appeal: ‘Place, in Thomas, frequently operates as the sum total of the locations that have been left behind or have yet to be reached’ (Macfarlane, 2012, 325). In Thomas’ generous, precise vision, patient attentiveness, and sense of the urgent need to reconnect, many contemporary writers have found a poet with much to teach us in the current era of ecological vulnerability.

Thomas does indeed in many respects hold up an example we would do well to heed. There is, however, more to Thomas than a worthy example, and this hangs on his peculiar (and, from today’s perspective, *timely*) sense of time. Longley notes that the capacity to ‘think in terms of millennia’ is key to Thomas’

‘ecocentric sense of history’ (Longley, 1996, 108); and Macfarlane’s assertion that Thomas depicts any given place as the sum total of the times to which it *will have been* host points to the uncanniness of time in much of his writing. It is this future anterior sensibility which allows us to explore what a poetics of time ecology looks like.

Thomas’ landscapes typically consist of gloomy woods, impenetrable hollows, and abandoned buildings, (un)peopled by ghosts and doppelgängers. In this, he shares Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense that landscapes are formed in the interplay of presence and absence (Nancy, 2005, 57). Thomas’ uncanny landscapes are in fact what Barbara Adam calls *timescapes*: spaces experienced most vividly in their rhythms and tempos, and the marks they bear of past and future presences. Roadways and paths are most often the pages on which he reads the presence of other times, to the point that he appears to suggest that landscapes possess memories of their own: ‘Even when deserted, these old roads are kept in memory by many signs. The grass refuses to grow over the still stream of turf in the same way as either side of it. A line of thorn trees follows their course, or the hedge or fence or wall dividing two fields’ (Thomas, 1980, 27). His sense of time is marked by ambivalence. A particular meadow scene in *The Heart of England* gives rise to ‘that poignant joy in which half-consciously we know that never again shall we be just here and thus, but the joy, too, of knowing that we take these things along with us to the end’ (Thomas, 1982, 62). In his poetry times coexist in sinister and uncanny ways:

And the hollow past
 Half yields the dead that never
 More than half hidden lie:
 And out they creep and back again for ever. (Thomas, 2008, 100)

For Thomas times past and to come are often, in a Latourian fashion, folded in upon the present. In *The South Country* Thomas proposed that this imbricated appreciation of time was essential to recognising what is really present in the landscape: ‘the landscape retains the most permanent marks of the past,’ he said,

‘and a wise examination of it should evoke the beginnings of the majestic sentiment of our oneness with the future and the past’ (Thomas, 2009, 22, 132). In Thomas we frequently see a poetics of what Adam calls time ecology at work: a sensibility open to the rhythms of the more-than-human world which have been overwhelmed by the rush of linear, industrial, clock-based time (Adam, 1997, 73). In short, Thomas habitually, even compulsively, reads the landscape on multiple scales.

Thomas’ proposal aligns him with Adam’s assertion that terms such as ‘environment’ and ‘sustainability’ are more closely to do with time than with space. Contrasting the delimited, disciplinary regime of industrial time with the rhythms of the more-than-human world, Adam suggests that to properly understand our time of profound and accelerating ecological threats we need to develop ‘a sensitivity to time in its diverse forms’ as the precursor to a time ecology (Adam et. al., 1997, 75). The trick is to become open to the *haunting* of the environment, to time as ‘the invisible “other”, that which works outside and beyond the reach of our sense’ (Adam, 1998, 10). Via Adam’s notion of timescapes, then, it becomes possible to read the prescience of Thomas’ writing in the light of the wrenching of human epistemology into new, unprecedented formations in the Anthropocene. Haunted by an invisible other that is unbounded in time and space, the uncanny timescapes of Thomas’ poetry and prose can be read as anterior echoes of the darker inflections of contemporary ecological thinking.

Consider Thomas’ ‘Digging’, a poem written in July 1915:

What matter makes my spade for tears or mirth,
 Letting down two clay pipes into the earth?
 The one I smoked, the other a soldier
 Of Blenheim, Ramillies, and Malplaquet
 Perhaps. The dead man’s immortality
 Lies represented lightly with my own,
 A yard or two nearer the living air

Than bones of ancients who, amazed to see
 Almighty God erect the mastodon,
 Once laughed, or wept, in this same light of day. (Thomas, 2008, 99)

Here an acute sense of ecological history radically decentres the conventional elegiac subject. Casting its net of attention over multiple temporal scales, the elegiac sensibility bleeds into the ground, enveloping the various bones interred there and denying the significance of chronological differentiation, where the shifts of a millennium or two here equate with a yard or two there. As an ecological elegist, Thomas is willing to stay with the uncertainty (laughing? weeping?) and (in the manner of anti-elegy) refuses to translate grief into consolation (Ramazani, 1994, 1, 3). Clifton Spargo has argued that unresolved mourning constitutes an ethical act, an acknowledgement of and ceding to the ‘radical alterity of the other whom one mourns’ (Spargo, 2004, 13). Reading ‘Digging’ in the Anthropocene therefore calls to mind the imperative to redraw the boundaries of the human to accommodate humanity’s newly-acquired geological agency, and to invest in ways of thinking about time and the environment which are open to the irregular, the monstrous, and the precarious.

This aspect of ‘Digging’ refers us to another feature of contemporary ecological thinking, the radically open ‘ecological thought’ of Timothy Morton, which contrasts a concept of extreme inter-connectedness with modes of thought reliant on hierarchy and differentiation (Morton, 2010, 15). Thinking the ecological thought means, amongst other things, that the boundary between human and more-than-human cannot be successfully policed but must be given up to the fundamentally estranging effect of a mode of thinking predicated on uncertainty and hesitation, and on an unstinting openness to the profoundly other. The image Morton uses to illustrate this interconnectedness is the *mesh*. In contrast to the prevailing images of webs and networks used in ecological writing, which presume on a tessellation of forms, the mesh disavows any even vestigial trace of separateness — ‘nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully “itself”’ (Morton, 2010, 15) — and is fundamentally decentred. The mesh refuses the distinctions of centre and edge; each point, rather, is both centre and edge,

inside and outside, depending on the perspective and scale at which it is observed. As such it points to ambivalence in the idea of the Anthropocene itself. One consequence of the emergence of the Anthropocene in recent environmental discourse has been to emphasise human agency, and responsibility: in the age of man all human activity, collective and individual, is fodder for the intractable ethical calculations surrounding anthropogenic climate change. We are all, individually (although not everywhere to the same extent), changing the world around us dramatically and permanently. This is less a unitary image of human agency however, than one that is cumulative, gaseous, shifting, decentred. It is an agency which resides everywhere, and nowhere. Agency in the Anthropocene is a function of the inter-connectedness Morton describes. The ecological thought, as a mode of embracing the profoundly other, thus presents a way of thinking about the epistemic challenge of the Anthropocene; of how to think and feel about the appalling fact of our complicity in ecological degradation.

Thomas is perhaps most evidently an early eco-poet in the manner in which he exhibits this same radical openness, as seen at the close of ‘The Chalk Pit’:

Here, in fact, is nothing at all
 Except a silent place that once rang loud,
 And trees and us--imperfect friends, we men
 And trees since time began; and nevertheless
 Between us still we breed a mystery. (Thomas, 2008, 89)

Chalk pits, hollows, coombes: these worked-out, overgrown landscapes hold a particular fascination for Thomas, as spaces acutely opened out to presenting, as Nancy puts it, ‘a given absence of presence.’ In ‘The Chalk Pit’, what the speakers encounter is a space like a Cantor Set (another of Morton’s analogies), seemingly infinitely divisible into its constituent points and interstices (or presences and absences) such that it is possible to claim at the same time that there is *something* there, and there is not. Or, to quote Nancy again, ‘what presents itself there is the announcement of what is not there’ (Nancy, 2005, 59). Nothing,

except for a silence which contains an echo (which itself, as Thomas says in ‘Good-night’, contains a ghost); and a mystery bred between the insuperable differences of the human and more-than-human worlds (“imperfect friends”). What Thomas frequently meets in the landscape is a strangeness that is both an extension of his own alienation (see also the dark doubles found in poems such as ‘The Other’, ‘House and Man’, and ‘Lob’) *and* an encounter with the radical otherness of the more-than-human world. His recurring interest in doubling, permeability, and otherness, thus yields the same sense of uncanny affinities with the more-than-human world which Morton advocates.

My reading of Thomas thus departs from that of Stan Smith, who attributes the recurring presence of ghosts in Thomas’ poetry to his concern for the material effects of rural recession. Smith reads poems such as ‘The Barn’ primarily in economic terms, as ‘powerful little myth[s] of degradation and waste, of a countryside in decay’ (Smith, 1986, 74). Yet ‘The Barn’ also describes a complex ecosystem of more-than-human tenants of the ‘abandoned’ barn which poses an implicit answer to the speaker’s question, ‘What holds it up?’ (Thomas, 2008, 63). Of ‘Over the Hills’ Smith remarks that the lines ‘all were kind / all were strangers’ speak of the collapse of the rural economy (Smith, 1986, 64); yet it also brings to mind how in Thomas’ poetry radically other forms and perspectives are brought into the closest proximity in an uncanny entanglement of ecological thinking. It should be noted, though, that Thomas writes from an ecocentric perspective, ‘not only conceptually,’ as Longley stresses, ‘but also in terms of poetic structure’ (Longley, 1996, 109). Specifically, Thomas’s sense of time ecology is expressed, first, in the interplay between a sophisticated syntax which plays upon the tension of opposites (presence/absence; dark/light; pure/impure) and an involute sound patterning based on internal or embedded rhyme; and second, in a complex fractal patterning, in which a single line displays the same level of formal and thematic complexity as an entire poem.

Martin Scofield has suggested that Thomas’ odd syntax is more important than sound to understanding the fluid perspectival shifts behind the apparent simplicity of his verse. The irregular, idiosyncratic syntax of the poetry allowed

Thomas to break with the more stultifying modes of thinking which afflicted his prose (much of which he dismissed as hack-work), and to achieve a more complex interleaving of perspectives: 'the sense,' as Scofield puts it, 'that no experience [...] exists for the poet without being accompanied in some way by its opposite' (Scofield, 1982, 29). He gives the long final sentence of 'Rain' as a particularly acute example:

But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying tonight or lying still awake
Solitary, listening to the rain,
Either in pain or thus in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead,
Like a cold water among broken reeds,
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
Like me who have no love which this wild rain
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be towards what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint. (Thomas, 2008, 105)

For Scofield, the poem's effects depend on the sentence's 'extraordinary syntactical curve', in which the speaker moves beyond self-consciousness to an ambiguous position between solipsism and sympathy (Scofield, 1982, 32). The poem refuses to settle on a single, definite perspective, a restlessness which culminates in the final uncertainty of 'the tempest tells me'. There seems little to dispute in Scofield's reading, but perhaps something to add. 'Rain' can be read as a work of what Bonnie Costello has called anticipatory mourning (Costello, 2010, 330). Its syntactic disquiet, which refuses the consolation of a definitive meaning, is an attempt to stay with a grief that has yet to occur, and in this shadows the ecologically-minded timeslips of poems such as 'Aspens' or 'Digging'. In fact, it is frequently the case that the peculiarities of Thomas's syntax, as they accommodate the play of presence and absence, modulate an awareness of multiple, coexisting times.

Contrary to Scofield's assertion, sound is as integral to this effect as syntax. For example, 'Melancholy' presents similar syntactic manoeuvres and contradictions to those found in 'Rain': while the speaker 'feared the solitude / Far more I feared all company' (Thomas, 2008, 85); affective and epistemological ('despair' and 'strange sweetness'; 'What I desired I knew not, but whate're my choice / Vain it must be, I knew') opposites feature also. However, the poem's restless display of antitheses develops into what is effectively an aural geography:

All day long I heard a distant cuckoo calling
And, soft as dulcimers, sounds of near water falling,
And, softer, and remote as if in history,
Rumours of what had touched my friends, my foes, and me. (Thomas, 2008, 85)

In these final four lines we see the landscape transformed by the sequence of echoes into a timescape, achieving an uncanny effect of receding and returning. Articulate echoes are for Thomas an important signifier of the enduring presentness of the invisible other: in 'March', the speaker detects 'a silence / Saying that Spring returns'; in 'The Mill-Water', one of Thomas' most sustained engagements with the expressive qualities of (in this case, intuited) echoes, he explicitly links sound and perception: 'All thoughts begin or end upon this sound' (Thomas, 2008, 35, 98); but they as often resound from times to come as from times past.

'The Bridge' is one such instance. Like 'Rain', it is a poem concerned with a moment of pause or interruption. As such, it depicts a landscape perceived as much in terms of its temporal as its physical inflections. Thomas explicitly relies on the interplay of sound and syntax to convey an impression of multiple times folded within the present moment. The poem's speaker, having halted on the titular bridge, refuses what we might call the consolation of progression, choosing instead to remain suspended between places and states. As with 'Melancholy' or 'Rain', Thomas' restless syntax continually shows opposites in parallel. But the poem's particular uncanny effect owes more to the contrast

between internal rhyme and the same-rhyming of the final two lines in each stanza. For example:

All are behind, the kind
 And the unkind too, no more
 Tonight than a dream. The stream
 Runs softly yet drowns the Past,
 The dark-lit stream has drowned the Future and the Past. (Thomas, 2008, 66)

To the extent Thomas operates here as a poet of the mesh, it is in terms of the enmeshing of multiple temporal scales within the present. The embedded rhymes provide a gentle, eddying propulsion which is dramatically interrupted by the surprise of the identical end rhymes in the last lines. The effect is of a distinctly uncanny familiarity underlying the play of opposites in the rest of the poem. Most significantly, the stanza builds to an impossible image of times folded together. The paradoxically dark-lit stream, softly flowing yet also overwhelming, takes all other times into itself: motion and stasis combine uncannily.

‘Interval’ is yet another ‘paused’ poem (it is worth reflecting that, for a poet of the road as Macfarlane characterises him, Thomas’ ambulatory speakers are often stationary). Here, Thomas’ inversions of sentence structure (and sense) and intricate sound patterning are predicated on a keen sense of how the folding together of times in space produces landscapes in perpetual flux:

Gone the wild day:
 A wilder night
 Coming makes way
 For brief twilight. (Thomas, 2008, 39)

The opening stanza, as Longley has demonstrated, is chiasmic (‘Gone...wild...wilder...Coming’), presenting an unsettling tension between escalation and stability, contrasting the ‘threatening shift in the form of verb and

adjective' (Longley, 1986, 67) with the apparent symmetry of the embedded chiasmus. This seeming harmony is itself undermined, however, by 'makes way', the onset of what Longley calls 'a different balancing movement' (Longley, 1986, 67), which throws the careful equilibrium of the first chiasmic lines into the decidedly off-kilter patterning of the rest of the poem, marked by the tension between a more straightforward syntax and a restless chiaroscuro (the drenched road 'shines almost'; 'the cloud pack / breaks for one gleam'). For Longley, this swaying rhythm is evocative of the 'stormy rest' the poem describes; it also conjures Thomas's sense of the timescape as a "story of immanent forces" (Adam et. al., 1997, 81). These examples illustrate that Thomas' timescapes rely as much on aural effects as the interruption of word-order, or rather on the collaboration between the two, to convey the profound oddness of a temporal ecology. Indeed, in some poems his consciousness of times folded within times reaches a level of fractal patterning that itself operates over multiple scales.

Benoit Mandelbrot devised fractal geometry as an alternative to the limitations of Euclidian geometry, which lacks a proper vocabulary to describe shapes that appear in the world. As he put it in *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, 'Clouds are not spheres, mountains are not cones, coastlines are not circles, and bark is not smooth, nor does lightning travel in a straight line' (Mandelbrot, 1983, 1). To account for the irregularity of real-world shapes, fractal geometry presents shapes whose symmetry comes not from their smoothness or predictability but from their *scaling*: 'fractals are shapes whose roughness and fragmentation neither tend to vanish, nor fluctuate up and down, but remain essentially unchanged as one zooms in continually and examination is refined' (Mandelbrot, 1989, 4). Another term Mandelbrot employs is *self-similarity*: whereas Euclidian forms tend increasingly towards linearity with magnification, fractals present the same level of irregularity at all scales, from the root hairs of a plant to its branch structures, the whorls of seashells, or the Fibonacci patterning of a cauliflower. Fractals therefore allow for the expression of self-similarity across multiple scales. The implications for a reading strategy which takes account of scale effects, for giving form to the disjunctive framing of the human in the Anthropocene, are immediately evident (indeed, Morton ends *The Ecological*

Thought with a call for an art of fractal geometry). Just as the Anthropocene has conjured the spectre of humanity as its own monstrous other, massively dispersed in time and space but nonetheless intimately connected, a relation of difference and distance predicated on self-similarity, fractal patterns are an illustration of dispersed presence, of the uncanny nature of looking across different scales.

Given his interest in dark doubles, there are persuasive grounds for thinking of Thomas as practicing a kind of fractal poetics. This is not the same fractal form defined by Alice Fulton, a digressive mode of writing which has a foot in both high modernism and postmodern genre-splicing (neither of which apply much to Thomas). One aspect of Fulton's fractal poetics does apply, however; in fact, could be read as the fundamental component of Thomas' verse which permits reading at multiple scales: that any element of the poem, however small (a stanza, a line, or a cluster of sounds) is the crystallization in miniature of the whole. Formal patterns repeat at all scales in many of Thomas' poems, and the thematic richness is not diminished by reductions in scale; rather there is a 'nesting of pattern within pattern'. His plays on syntax and sound patterning create exactly this impression of 'an endless imbedding of the shape [of the poem] into itself' (Fulton, 1999, 58). It is this capacity to give form to the folding together of things which most persuasively identifies Thomas as a poet of uncanny timescapes.

The uncanniness is crucial here: Thomas' fractal poems display a high degree of scaling in their design, so that, in keeping with the interplay of presence and absence in his work, difference is emphasised by self-similarity. In 'July', the poem's two 6 line stanzas reflect its object, the still scene in which 'Naught moves but clouds, and in the glassy lake / Their doubles and the shadow of my boat' (Thomas, 2008, 88). Other poems, such as 'The Bridge' or 'The Green Roads', achieve self-similarity through sound patterning, specifically repetition. In 'Two Pewits', the series of end-rhyme repetends (sky; cry; high; why; fly; silently) frames a series of doublings, the chiaroscuro of white moon and dark earth, the sporting dart and weave of the birds themselves, and the insubstantial 'ghost' who wonders what is the reason for their exuberance:

And merrily they cry
 [...] tossing high,
 Over the ghost who wonders why
 So merrily they cry and fly,
 Nor choose 'twixt earth and sky,
 While the moon's quarter silently
 Rides, and earth rests as silently. (Thomas, 2008, 70)

The rising tenor of self-similar short 'i' sounds pitches the 'ghost's' sense of isolation from the scene to dizzying heights, only to be quieted by the final repeated end rhymes as the scene itself is quieted. Each of these effects — use of doubles, the interplay between image and stanza form, the uncanny effect of repetition — are present in 'The Hollow Wood', a poem in which, as Longley notes, 'doubleness, otherness shapes the entire structure' (Longley in Thomas, 2008, 171):

Out in the sun the goldfinch flits
 Along the thistle-tops, flits and twits
 Above the hollow wood
 Where birds swim like fish--
 Fish that laugh and shriek--
 To and fro, far below
 In the pale hollow wood.

Lichen, ivy, and moss
 Keep evergreen the trees
 That stand half-flayed and dying,
 And the dead trees on their knees
 In dog's-mercury and moss:
 And the bright twit of the goldfinch drops
 Down there as he flits on thistle-tops. (Thomas, 2008, 48)

As Longley observes, ‘The Hollow Wood’ takes further the doubling effect of paired stanzas in ‘July’: here, the two stanzas almost perfectly mirror one another in rhyme-scheme, line length, and sound effects (Longley in Thomas, 2008, 171). The result is one of Thomas’ most uncanny poems, made more so by the not quite perfect alignment of the mirroring effect. In each stanza, something disrupts the flow without destabilising the overall pattern. The penultimate line of stanza 1 ought to be rhymed with the fourth (‘Where birds swim like fish’) if it is to properly mirror the second stanza. This halt in the rhyme scheme, echoing the disturbing effect of the image in line 4, breaks the pattern but sustains the rhythmic flow via the embedded rhymes (‘to’, ‘fro’, ‘below’, picked up also in ‘hollow’ in the next line). The surprise of the embedded rhyme prepares the reader for the same effect in the final couplet, which takes the end-rhyme words of the poem’s opening (‘flits’, ‘twits’) and buries them in the line just as the goldfinch ‘drops / Down’ into the hollow wood. The overall effect is of a spectral, involuted landscape, opening inwards to a space in which an absence takes place.

‘November’, which was only Thomas’ second poem written in the extraordinary two-year period before his death at Arras, is perhaps the most striking example of how fractal poetics allows him to imagine the landscape as timescape. The opening lines have the apparent simplicity of a nursery rhyme. As with the poems examined above, though, it is also a work concerned with pairs and contrasts in which Thomas’ interest in doubling, inversion, and repetition are evident at every level. Consider those opening lines: ‘November’s days are thirty: / November’s earth is dirty’ (Thomas, 2008, 34). Behind their sing-song lilt these lines initiate a fractal arrangement of inversions which structures the whole poem. The chiasmic fricatives (*days are thirty*; *earth is dirty*) represent the most acute instance of a pattern of doublings, which extends also from the AA / BB rhyme scheme to the mirroring of themes across the two stanzas. ‘November’ interrogates the binary of pure and impure, the month’s clean skies contrasting with the dark mud of its leaf-clotted paths. The first stanza has its eye on the palimpsest of mud and leaf-litter — ‘the prettiest things on ground are the paths / [...] / With foot and wing-tip overprinted’ — while in the second, two ‘dirty earth men’ stare up at a sky ‘Clean and clear and sweet and cold’. In both stanzas we

might perhaps read in the cluster of monosyllables ('Twig, leaf, flint, thorn, / Straw, feather'), the influence of what Seamus Heaney called John Clare's 'love for the one-thing-after-anotherness of the world,' but tuned to a more melancholy pitch. (Heaney, 2002, 282) More significant though is that the fractal patterns in 'November' give rise to several moments in which a dominant perspective is radically decentered. In the first, 'the full moon in the east / Looks at the planet in the west / And earth is silent as it is black'; in the second, the latter of the two watchers,

[...] loves earth and November more dearly
Because without them, he sees clearly,
The sky would be nothing more to his eye
Than he, in any case, is to the sky;
He loves even the mud whose dyes
Renounce all brightness to the skies. (Thomas, 2008, 34)

The second watcher chooses impurity over purity; mixing over segregation. His is the eye that finds beauty in the grungy paths *because* they bear the imprint of other presences, and loves the mud because its modest reflection, *renouncing* all brightness, equalises his place in relation to the more-than-human world. It is in this capacity for re-visioning, for a more *intentional looking* at what constitutes the landscape surrounding him, that Thomas' value as a poet for contemporary eco-criticism resides. It would be misleading to draw parallels between the crisis of war which Thomas faced and which is encoded in his poetry, and that of today; nonetheless, his sense of urgency and vulnerability resonates. Through an insistent scaling effect, Thomas' densely-woven fractal patterns accumulate as a poetics of time ecology, in which past and future have as great a claim as the present upon our perspective. In the current 'age of man', achieving this perspective has a compelling ethical force. We need to read Edward Thomas in the Anthropocene because his work, as it anticipates the radical inter-connectedness of Morton's ecological thought and gives rise to the perspective of the mesh, shapes a possible response: one that is decentred, open, and present to the enduring past, the

already-occurring future, and to that which is both profoundly other and profoundly entangled in his uncanny timescapes.

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